

**PROMOTION OF THE BOOK
“REALITIES OF THE ALBANIAN–BRITISH
RELATIONSHIP”**

Written by Mal Berisha



**Presented at the British Embassy in Tirana,
in the presence of former Albanian Prime Minister Prof. Dr. Sali
Berisha, H.E. Nicholas Cannon, Ambassador of the United
Kingdom to Albania, and numerous other ambassadors and
distinguished guests.**

Mal Berisha's speech:

Good evening!

Your Excellency Ambassador Cannon!

Mrs. Cannon

Speaker of Parliament Mr. Meta

Dear Doctor Berisha

Excellences, Ambassadors of the State of Israeli, Republic of Kosova

Members of the Parliament,

Dear friends

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am truly delighted to be here this evening. Allow me, first and foremost, to express my deepest appreciation and gratitude to Ambassador Cannon and Alice for giving me the opportunity to share with this distinguished audience my experiences during my tenure as the Ambassador of Albania to the Court of St. James's.

The book I will be presenting tonight, in the company of such a convivial group of history enthusiasts, is part of a series of works that I have humbly authored, translated, or contributed to in the hope of supporting future research. All of these books, in one way or another, converge on a common and crucial theme:

This presentation seeks to illuminate the inestimable contributions made by Anglo-Americans to Albania throughout various periods of its existence. At times, these contributions have taken on cultural and artistic dimensions; at other times, they have been political and of immense importance to the vitality of our small nation. For the purpose of this presentation, I shall mention only a few.

The main motive that inspired me to further investigate the subject was a strong desire to take a critical counter-narrative stance against the anti-Anglo-American ideology promoted by the Albanian communist regime, particularly as embodied in the infamous book "*The Anglo-American Danger Against Albania*." This publication represents a deliberate and egregious distortion of the historical relations between Albania, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

As is often the case with ongoing research, my appetite for the subject grew as new discoveries came to light. The beginning of this journey dates back to the early 1990s in Istanbul, Turkey, where I served as the General Consul of Albania. During a pleasant encounter with John Freely, an Irish-American professor of mathematics with a deep interest in Albania, he suggested I look into a book he had written titled *The False Messiah: Sabethai Zevi*, about a Turkish Jew who lived for some time and died in the city of Berat. He also recommended another important work: *Southern Albania or Northern Epirus in*

European International Affairs, 1912–1923, written by Edith Pierpont Stickney of Stanford University.

Among the many facts mentioned by Silajdžić, one left a lasting impression on me. The figure who captured my undivided attention was Charles Telford Erickson and the years he spent in Albania. This discovery sparked a deep interest in learning more about his contributions to our country. The research spanned four years and involved examining books, newspapers, and public records—primarily at the Yale Divinity Library in Connecticut.

The story of his life stands as a powerful illustration of the goodwill of the American people and of profound personal sacrifice. One of the most remarkable findings in my book concerns the influence Mr. Erickson had on President Woodrow Wilson regarding matters related to Albania. As a result, President Wilson stood on the right side of history by remaining firm in his promise that Albania would enjoy its freedom and its right to self-determination at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919.

However, this was not Erickson's only significant contribution. He founded the School of Agriculture in Kavaja and represented the Pan-Albanian Federation VATRA at the United Nations Conference in San Francisco in 1945—at a time when Albania was denied a seat. At the venerable age of 99, when he passed away, Mr. Erickson had authored six books about Albania and had spent over [number] decades living in the country.

A compilation of Erickson's work was presented to the American Ambassador in Tirana, in the presence of government representatives, as well as at the Anglo-Albanian Association in London and the Pan-Albanian Federation of America in New York City.

Because much of Albanian history has been viewed through the lens of Anglo-American scholars and institutions, I undertook a thorough study of the most prestigious Western media sources. This journey led me to the New York Public Library, where I examined annual editions of *National Geographic* magazine from 1888 to 2007—only to discover that Albania had been featured prominently among its most exotic and captivating subjects. One of the most fascinating examples was that of Melville Chater, the celebrated traveler, who published a 70-page article on Albania. Among other articles featured in the magazine, one could find concrete facts that confirmed the validity of key historical events. Drawing inspiration from these writings, I published the book *Shqiptarët, Lisë mbi Truallin Ilir*. This book, too, was presented to the Albanian public, the diaspora, and friends of Albania in New York City. As a continuation of this subject, the follow-up book *Shqiptarët, Europianët më të Lashtë dhe më të Rinj* soon followed.

While studying Jewish life in Albania and the remarkable story of the Albanian “Righteous Among the Nations,” rooted in the tradition of *Besa Shqiptare*, my interest turned to the life of Herman Bernstein, who served as the U.S. Minister (Ambassador) to Albania from 1930 to 1933. His love for Albania was profound, and the legacy of his diplomatic work remains

imprinted not only in the memory of our nation but also in the very foundations of both Albanian-American and Albanian-Jewish relations.

The Jewish story recorded by Ambassador Bernstein is one that makes us all proud. Moreover, he foresaw the Italian occupation of Albania five years before it occurred, warning of it in an article he published in *The New York Times*.

This is the story of an ambassador who not only fulfilled his diplomatic reporting duties, but also foresaw the dangers approaching the host country. His translation—together with his daughter Dorothy—of Aleksandër Moisiu's drama *The Prisoner* from German into English demonstrates how deeply he was connected to the Albanian people and culture. His contribution can be considered a cornerstone of the exceptional relations between our nations.

I had the honor of presenting his work at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York, under the auspices of Professor Jonathan Brent, and in London under the patronage of H.E. Matthew Barzun, U.S. Ambassador to the United Kingdom, in collaboration with the Israeli and Lithuanian Ambassadors, at an event held at the U.S. Embassy in London.

As we all know, English literature was part of our educational system even during the communist era. Having had the honor of serving as Albania's Ambassador to the Court of St. James's, I felt compelled to send a message to my compatriots living in the United Kingdom—especially to those in the process of naturalization.

***The United Kingdom is a great nation, founded on the enduring principles of freedom. It is the birthplace of the Magna Carta, which marked its 800th anniversary just last year. From the day I assumed my post, I shared this message with my compatriots: Be exemplary British citizens. Combine the virtues of our own heritage with those of the British people, and you will embody the finest synthesis among the diverse communities that shape British society.*

In order to motivate my fellow compatriots to hold British values in high esteem, I pursued a well-structured approach to fulfilling all of my day-to-day responsibilities as Ambassador. Alongside these duties, I also advanced several key priorities.

One of them was to promote Albania and present it to the British public as a country with a rich spiritual heritage, a nation of remarkable artists, and a destination worthy of being visited, invested in, and ultimately recognized as a truly European country.

It is common for every ambassador to set a number of objectives and targets they hope to achieve by the end of their mission. In my view, these goals depend greatly on the country where one is posted. For example, had I been posted in China, I would have focused more on attracting Chinese investment, drawing also on the tradition of economic relations between our two countries.

In my case, I saw it as imperative to transform the negative perceptions of Albania portrayed in the daily media—perceptions that often focused more on crimes committed

by a few Albanian emigrants than on the true human and national values of our people. In pursuing this goal, I sought to leave a meaningful imprint on my diplomatic legacy, primarily through Cultural Diplomacy. I wanted to send a clear message to the British public, to the British-Albanian community, and to Albanians living in the United Kingdom:

Who are we?

Who are we—not as we like to present ourselves, but as British travelers, artists, writers, historians, military officers, philosophers, and chroniclers have seen us, not only throughout the centuries but even today?

That question was not easy to answer, yet not impossible.

A number of activities—mostly organized in collaboration with members of the Anglo-Albanian Association—occupied much of my professional time during my service in London. In parallel, I devoted nearly all of my free time to exploring and illuminating British perceptions of Albanians. That effort inspired me to write, translate, and compile the book *Realitet Shqiptaro-Britanike*.

There are 35 authors and travelers from whom I have extracted the *crème de la crème* of their writings about Albania and the Albanian people.

In my initial draft, I posed a series of questions and strived to provide thoughtful answers:

- What are the strong historical links between Albania and the United Kingdom?
- What are the key points of contact?
- How have Albanians been perceived?
- What did British scholars teach their countrymen about Albanians?
- When did British interest in Albania begin?
- Who are the prominent figures who helped shape their nation's impression of Albania?
- Who left a lasting trace in the history of our bilateral relations?
- Which British diplomats, serving in Albania since 1922, shaped the official perception of the United Kingdom toward Albania?
- Who are the Albanian diplomats who influenced the perception of Albanians toward the British—and vice versa?
- What has been the positive impact of these perceptions on our relations?
- What role have such perceptions played in strengthening our diplomatic and cultural ties?
-

I will not delve into every detail or name included in the book, but I cannot fail to mention several distinguished individuals whose contributions have been invaluable:

Richard Knolles, William Martin Leake, George Gordon Byron, John Hobhouse, Charles Cockerell, Henry Holland, Benjamin Disraeli, David Urquhart, Edward Lear, Edmund Spencer, Arthur Kavanagh, Adam Peacock, Hart Hodgson, Aubrey Herbert, Edith Durham,

Margaret Hasluck, Lady Elizabeth Carnarvon, Mary Herbert, Ruth Pennington, and Sir Noel Malcolm.

All of these British figures have left a meaningful impact on British–Albanian relations. That is why I have always viewed British policy toward Albania with a sense of sympathy and appreciation. I would like to highlight a few key moments in the history of our relationship. If President Woodrow Wilson, through his Fourteen Points on the self-determination of small nations, helped protect Albania from being dismembered, it was Aubrey Herbert—together with Lord Cecil and former Prime Minister Arthur Balfour—who supported Albania’s admission to the League of Nations. Our country became the 42nd member of the League.

It was also a British officer, Colonel Dayrell Oakley-Hill, who played a vital role in organizing the Albanian Gendarmerie.

The Special Operations Executive (SOE), known as “Churchill’s Secret Army,” was one of the most significant contributions of the British government during the Second World War. British SOE operatives landed in Albania in 1943. Their mission and activities in the country are vividly documented in a compelling book by Roderick Bailey, published by Random House. This book was officially launched at the Embassy of Albania in London.

What I would like to highlight in this context is the tragic story of the 53 British soldiers who lost their lives on Albanian soil. In 1950, Her Majesty’s Government commissioned a French diplomat to recover their remains. However, the Albanian communist government concealed the bodies in an undisclosed location—one that remained hidden until the reestablishment of Albanian–British diplomatic relations.

Let me state this clearly: among all the foreign soldiers who have lost their lives on Albanian soil—since the time of the Roman Empire—the only ones who died to protect Albania, rather than to occupy it, were the British. This, to me, is a deeply meaningful and historically significant fact.

We all speak about Kosovo. I firmly believe that, had it not been for the decisive support of the United Kingdom and the United States—or vice versa—Kosovo would not be the sovereign country it is today.

This book also includes a brief history of all British ambassadors who have served in Albania, beginning with Sir Harry Eyres and continuing through to H.E. Mr. Nicholas Cannon. It also documents the Albanian ambassadors who have served in London, starting with the distinguished statesman and diplomat Mehmet Konica.

Furthermore, the well-known British journalist Harry Eyres—who wrote about the exhibition of our renowned painter Bashkim Ahmetaj (Izano) in *Newsweek*—is a fourth-generation descendant of Sir Charles Augustus Eyres. He is immensely proud of his ancestor’s service in Albania.

Meanwhile, all Albanian ambassadors who served at the Court of St. James's before 1939 met tragic fates: they were either imprisoned by the communist regime, executed, or died in exile.

Promoting Albanian values and demonstrating to others who we are—and how we have been perceived—while in Great Britain, was, for me, a personal mission.

That is why this book includes the names of several distinguished British lords, knights, and longtime friends of Albania on one side, and on the other, the names of Albanians who have achieved remarkable success in the United Kingdom as intellectuals, professors, and entrepreneurs.

In conclusion, I have highlighted four symbolic elements in London that continue to make Albanians proud:

- The monument of Skanderbeg in Bayswater.
- The portrait of George Gordon Byron at the National Portrait Gallery.
- Edith Durham's Albania Collection at the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.
- The portrait of Mehmet Ali Pasha, founder of modern Egypt, of Albanian origin.

Thank you!

